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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 000064

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TREASURY FOR SUSAN CHUN AND JEAN-PAUL DUVIVIER
DOJ OPDAT FOR LEHMANN

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/09/2018
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [ECON](#) [KDEM](#) [PHUM](#) [BG](#)
SUBJECT: NEW GOVERNMENT ADVISERS ARE GENERALLY
WELL-REGARDED AND FAMILIAR FACES

REF: DHAKA 0029

Classified By: CDA a.i. Geeta Pasi, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The Caretaker Government (CTG) marked its first anniversary with a broad shake-up to steady its troubled administration. On January 9, five widely respected Bangladeshis joined the Council of Advisers, replacing members who resigned under pressure after a series of missteps contributed to the CTG's eroding popularity. The following day, the CTG appointed three high-powered special assistants to help the overworked Council. Two days later, the Chief Adviser, who heads the Council and government, in a televised address to the nation announced plans to hold talks with political parties to ensure broad political reforms leading to national elections by year's end stay on track. The Embassy will immediately seek meetings with the new advisers to affirm our strong support for implementing the electoral roadmap and helping the government deal with the country's myriad other challenges. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) The new advisers sworn in to the 11-member Council are Hassan Ariff, a former attorney general who is president of the respected human-rights organization Odhikar; Hossain Zillur Rahman, a prominent economist who is the executive chairman of the Power and Participation Research Centre think tank; Rasheda K. Choudhury, chief executive officer of the non-governmental organization Campaign for Popular Education; Maj. Gen. (retired) Ghulam Quader, the former director general of the country's National Security Intelligence who is now executive director of the Center for Strategic & Peace Studies think tank; and Shawkat Ali, a former agriculture secretary who recently chaired a committee on local

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government reform. A variety of Embassy sources spoke of the new advisers in favorable terms, noting they are leading public and civic leaders who are highly regarded for their integrity.

¶3. (C) The initial portfolio assignments are law and parliamentary affairs, and religious affairs for Hassan Ariff; education and commerce for Hossain Zillur Rahman; primary and mass education, and women and children's affairs for Rasheda K. Choudhury; communications, and housing and

public works for Ghulam Quader; and health and family welfare, and food and disaster management for Shawkat Ali. Ariff is a long-standing Embassy contact; he went to the United States as a State Department-sponsored International Visitor for a criminal justice program in 1995. As the new Law Adviser, he can be expected to support urgently needed anti-terrorism legislation that was blocked by his predecessor, Mainul Hosein. Ariff also will likely support the creation of a career prosecution service and further champion the independence of the judiciary, which was formally separated from the executive last month.

14. (U) The three special assistants were appointed amid growing concern that the constitutionally mandated restriction to 11 advisers simply did not provide enough leadership to run the government for an extended period of time. The assistants are Brig. Gen. (retired) MA Malek, former head of the Power Development Board and the Rural Electrification Board; M Tamim, a professor at the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology; and Devasish Roy, a barrister who is king of one of the three major tribes in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Malek will have the post and telecommunications portfolio; Tamim's portfolio will be energy and mineral resources; and Roy's will be Chittagong Hill Tracts affairs.

15. (C) The nature of the Council shake-up underscored the substantial behind-the-scenes direction provided by the military since the CTG came to power on January 12, 2007, the day after declaration of a State of Emergency to head off growing political violence. Ariff (protect) told the Embassy that he was offered the post of Law Adviser by a member of the military Directorate General of Forces Intelligence and received a follow-up phone call from Chief of Army Staff General Moeen Uddin Ahmed, to whom he gave his verbal

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consent.

16. (C) On the heels of the shake-up, Chief Adviser Fakhruddin addressed the nation in a January 12 televised address to underscore the government's continued commitment to an electoral roadmap that includes a massive voter registration drive, broad electoral reform, and free and fair elections this year. He said that the CTG is considering easing restrictions on political activity and would enter a dialogue with political parties over the transition back to democracy. The parties, which are in disarray because many of their leaders are in jail on corruption charges and the State of Emergency restrictions, have long demanded a political dialogue with the government. The parties also have argued that their political expertise and grass-roots networks could help the government manage rocketing inflation and recover from a devastating cyclone in November.

17. (C) Comment: The sweeping shake-up of the mistake-prone Council of Advisers was long overdue, and the personnel changes are an important step toward more effective governance. The undermanned and overworked advisers had their hands full reacting to a series of crises -- from floods to a devastating cyclone to sharply rising prices -- making it difficult to exert the focused political leadership Bangladesh so desperately needs. Nowhere is that leadership more needed than in initiating a dialogue with political parties to reach consensus over how best to lock in democratic reforms and ensure a smooth transition back to elective government. The Chief Adviser's promise to engage the parties in dialogue is potentially an important step forward, but it is not yet clear who will be involved and what the parameters of the talks will be. The Embassy in its continuing support of the electoral roadmap will encourage remaining and new advisers alike to seize the opportunity created by the anniversary shake-up and aggressively steer Bangladesh back to democracy.

Pasi